

**Appropriations Committee**  
**February 14, 2017**

**Testimony regarding CHRO's Budget**

Good afternoon, Senator Formica, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak to you today. I am Cheryl Sharp, Deputy Director of the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities. The Commission's mission is to eliminate discrimination through civil and human rights law enforcement and to establish equal opportunity and justice for all persons within the state through advocacy and education. Our Executive Director Tanya Hughes already provided information about the work that the CHRO does in enforcing the civil rights statutes in Connecticut, through its contracts with the EEOC and HUD and through our state statutes, and in investigating and litigating claims of discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations. I want you to know though, that CHRO also works tirelessly to educate employers, housing providers and the residents of this state in order to avoid having to receive and investigate these complaints. At CHRO, we do not want "gotcha" moments; we want people to know the laws and to follow them. We continue to educate people with the goal that discrimination does not occur in the first place. Proposed cuts to the CHRO's budget will adversely affect our ability to work proactively on these issues.

During the past year, CHRO attorneys and staff members have partnered with the United States Dept. of Justice in its Civil Rights Roundtable, with the CT Department of Education in its Safe Schools Coalition (an anti-bullying training and advocacy group), the Racial Profiling Task-Force, and various other state and local organizations to spread the word that discrimination is illegal and how individuals and groups can respond to harassment, bullying or discriminatory treatment. CHRO has been successful on past years in having anti-discrimination notices printed on the back of traffic citations, and has continued its work with the Racial Profiling Task Force to study profiling by officers.

CHRO has provided training to numerous private employers, state agency employees, landlords, police departments and school groups so that the public knows its rights and employers/landlords know their obligations. CHRO employees have spoken to individuals, churches, mosques, schools, and libraries to get the word out that discrimination is illegal – that there are protections for individuals who are discriminated against and that businesses are more successful when they treat people fairly. Employees have conducted training to police departments and others about Implicit Bias and Cultural Competency. They have been presenters at the Transgender Health

& Law program, CT Bar Association programs, Realtor Associations, and spoken to General Contractors regarding CHRO's Contract Compliance programs, which help to involve small and minority businesses in the State's contracting practices.

Executive Director Tanya Hughes and I were invited to the White House for a celebration of the life of Azekah (Zeke) Jennings, the late DOJ employee who worked tirelessly to improve lives in communities all over the United States. CHRO, the only State Civil Rights Agency invited to participate in this celebration, was recognized for its CT Kids' Court Competition – a program to raise school children's awareness of civil rights issues through both written and oral presentations. CHRO also participated in the IAOHRA (International Association of Human Rights Agencies) Conference and the MS Foundation Conference.

CHRO also has an incredible internship program, where students from colleges and law schools around the country intern in our central office, regional offices and public hearing offices learning about our mediation and investigative process. They have learned about the role that they have in eliminating discrimination, participated in our Kids Speak and Kids Court competitions, conducted mediations and fact-finding conferences (under the supervision of CHRO staff), and used their creative talents to create public service announcements that can be viewed on our website to teach individuals about the fair housing laws.

CHRO's mediation program, part of our case processing process, is integral to our mission. CHRO has the highest success rate at mediation as compared to all other state agencies. Making this voluntary for Respondents, rather than mandatory for all, as proposed by the Governor's budget, will increase costs to the Commission and to all parties. Even where mediation is unsuccessful, parties have found that it opens the door to a greater understanding of the other party's position, and frequently leads to later mediation success. If we are unable to require that the parties attend and attempt mediation, (which is successful over 35% of the time), all of those cases will need to be investigated, taking additional time and resources. While mediation usually takes only a few hours on one occasion (and the decision as to whether to settle or not is totally up to the parties), investigation can be a several day process between fact-finding conferences, follow up witness interviews and drafting decisions. This would be a fiscally irresponsible action at this time.

CHRO has been proud to both enforce our State's laws against discrimination and to educate the public about their rights and obligations under the law. We hope to continue our mission and ultimately, reach our goal of eliminating discrimination altogether.